

# Maximizing Opportunities for Mothers to Succeed (MOMS)

## Mothers and Their Children:

# A New Beginning

**T**ina, a 28-year-old woman, is a victim of sexual abuse and domestic violence who has pacified her pain through substance abuse. She is homeless and acts as a prostitute to feed her drug habit—and to feed her three children. Tina is arrested and sentenced to the county jail. She enters the criminal justice system for the fifth time.

Tina has been abusing drugs and alcohol since the age of nine. A substance-abusing mother, who also molested her, raised Tina. Prior to Tina's latest arrest, Child Protective Services (CPS) rescued her children, placing them in a temporary foster home. Her oldest has now been adopted.

Tina has no resources and does not know where to turn for help. Locked away, Tina thinks she has no way of following her case plan set forth by CPS for reunification with her children. The case plan requires her to complete a substance abuse recovery program, attend parenting classes, participate in individual counseling, obtain appropriate housing, and remain clean and sober. She must meet these requirements before she can be reunified with her two other children.

Now in custody in the county jail, Tina enrolls in the Maximizing Opportunities for Mothers to Succeed (MOMS) program. She completes 8 weeks of the educational component of the MOMS program and is assigned a case manager. The curriculum, a gender-responsive lesson plan, focuses on women's issues. It is provided in a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment that fosters trust, bonding, and connection. It emphasizes the identified needs of women involved in the justice system, encouraging empowerment and self-sufficiency.

After completing the educational component, Tina applies for and is accepted into the Sheriff's Office Community Re-Entry Center, where she continues in the MOMS program. Tina attends parenting classes and substance abuse groups in the community, and she works with her case manager on a plan to be reunited with her children. The case manager also initiates contact between Tina and the

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CPS worker assigned to Tina's children. Her MOMS case manager coordinates the interactions between the CPS worker and Tina and also provides documentation of her progress and her attendance in MOMS programming. As a result of this collaboration, the court orders reunification procedures to be initiated.

Tina has subsequently been released from custody. She enjoys regular child visitation and is living in a residential drug treatment program. Tina remains clean and sober, and she continues to heal from her issues of addiction and childhood abuse. Tina maintains contact with her MOMS case manager, who supports her in her goal of self-sufficiency and reunification with her children.

### **Children in Need**

Tina's story—but without the successful ending—is all too familiar for those of us who work in the criminal justice system. National statistics indicate that women now make up 11% of incarcerated adults, and women in the criminal justice system have an average of 2.5 children each. Rising numbers of incarcerated, pregnant, and/or parenting women being sentenced to jail and prison have resulted in many more children being separated from their mothers. These children end up living with relatives or entering the foster care system.

The Alameda County Sheriff's Office offers all mothers and pregnant women incarcerated in the county jail an opportunity to participate in the MOMS program. Since the inception of the MOMS program in September 1999, 546 pregnant and parenting women and 1,164 children have received services.

The MOMS program combines intensive individual and group training, a gender-responsive educational component, case management, housing assistance, and other vital services with a wide range of community-based post-release services including substance abuse treatment, mental health care, and primary services. Incarcerated pregnant women and women with young children receive a range of intensive, gender-responsive, and culturally appropriate services. These services include community-based case management services, assistance with life planning, and ongoing support during incarceration and post-release. Additional benefits are:

- Opportunity to bond or re-establish bonds with their children through contact visits.
- Housing assistance during and after release.
- Opportunity to improve parenting and critical life skills through educational training.
- Guidance and advocacy for vocational and educational needs.
- Substance abuse education and access to substance abuse treatment, mental health services, primary care, and other community services.
- Assistance in developing and implementing an Individual Action Plan for attaining self-sufficiency.

The MOMS program is based on the belief that incarcerated women can succeed in reversing the effects of adverse behaviors and poor life choices when

they are empowered with new knowledge, treated with respect and dignity, and provided access to community resources.

The most important component of the program is its case management aspect. Through case management, participants can address their individual issues and concerns directly. The result is that women like Tina can continue to live productive lives. The program's effectiveness is currently being evaluated, and so far, we have learned that the most successful women are those who have remained in weekly contact with their case managers.

Continuity of care is the cornerstone of the program. The same community-based case managers who assist MOMS participants while they are in jail follow their progress post-release, coordinating and facilitating services, providing support and ongoing assistance. The main goal of the MOMS program is to promote the healthy development of children by increasing the capacity of their mothers for self-sufficiency and parent-child bonding.

### **Contributing Partners**

The MOMS program is a collaborative effort of the Alameda County Sheriff's Office and several community-based organizations, including:

- Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency (BOSS), located in Berkeley, the largest established provider of services for the homeless in Alameda County;
- Second Chance, located in Newark, a community-based counseling and recovery program; and
- Eden I & R, located in Hayward, an information and referral service recognized for accurate, up-to-date information about affordable housing.

Other supporting county agencies include Behavioral Health Care Services, Alameda County Social Services Agency, the county Public Defender's Office, the District Attorney's Office, the Public Health Department, the Probation Department, and the Children and Families First Commission.

The MOMS program receives significant financial support from the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, which has provided in-kind and cash resources. The Alameda County Healthy Families Commission, Alameda County Public Health Department, Alameda County Social Services Agency Partnership Grants program, and the California State Legislature have provided additional funding.

We have also retained the services of nationally recognized experts in the field of incarcerated women and the effects on their children, including Dr. Stephanie Covington, developer of the Helping Women Recover program, Dr. Denise Johnson of the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, and Dr. Barbara Bloom, a nationally known criminal justice consultant, professor, and researcher.

Recognizing the need for an improved educational environment for MOMS participants and other incarcerated individuals participating in educational and

self-improvement programs, the Alameda County Sheriff's Office constructed the "Sandy Turner Educational Center." The educational center, located at the Santa Rita County Jail, provides four classrooms as well as administrative office space for MOMS and inmate services staff.

## Evaluation Findings

From its inception, an important aspect of validating the MOMS program has been a 3-year evaluation component. The first-year evaluation has been completed. It indicated that the MOMS program has met most of its objectives and "enjoys the strong commitment of the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, a supportive advisory board, experienced and dedicated staff, a significant case management component and effective utilization of community resources." \*

Outcomes for 2001 include the following:

- Out of 254 total participants for the year, 171 clients received services after release.
- 50% of released clients remained in contact with their case managers for at least 3 months.
- All MOMS participants attended parenting classes.
- While in custody, 201 MOMS women talked with, wrote to, or visited with their children through the MOMS program.
- Fifty-six women were either reunified with or established on-going contact with their children after release.

Community support has been paramount in the expansion and continuing success of the MOMS program. Our newest collaborative effort is a housing project with the Oakland Housing Authority. The Authority has revitalized an apartment building that includes 12 three- and four-bedroom apartments and has agreed to make the units available to eligible MOMS clients after their release from jail. The MOMS program will identify the clients who need housing, and the Authority will then process their applications. The MOMS clients will live independently and may reside in this transitional housing project for up to 18 months, at which time the Authority will guarantee the clients permanent housing within the community. The collaboration with the Oakland Housing Authority is an important step toward increasing MOMS clients' likelihood of success.

Gandhi once said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Corrections professionals working together with health, social services, and community-based organizations can positively affect the development of children whose lives have been impacted by the incarceration of their mothers. One of our goals is to help other agencies replicate any aspect of the MOMS program that interests them. Please contact us if you would like more information. ■

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\* Barbara Bloom, "First Year Evaluation: Maximizing Opportunities for Mothers to Succeed (MOMS) Program," January 2001.